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## OPINION-EDITORIAL

### **AGRICULTURAL LAND RESERVE LARGER NOW THAN EVER IN HISTORY**

**By Pat Bell**

**August 9, 2005**

**Minister of Agriculture and Lands**

(646 words)

There are some basic errors about the Agricultural Land Reserve that are being made in recent objections and articles about a decision regarding farm land in Abbotsford (“Farmland exclusion, sale causes controversy: ALR official says it helps him see both sides of issue,” Aug. 9, 2005).

The Agricultural Land Reserve is the largest it has ever been in its history, with more than 4.76 million hectares set aside for farming.

There is more land now protected under the Agricultural Land Reserve than ever before.

Our government has added more land, removed less and increased the total by 40,000 hectares since taking office in 2001.

The previous government, which first introduced a panel-style review process for exclusion requests, allowed land to be excluded from the ALR at over twice the rate the current government did in its first three years (the most recent period for which data is available).

Your readers may be interested in reviewing the extensive statistics on the ALC’s website <http://www.alc.gov.bc.ca/>

I support the ALC and its independence in reaching the decision it did regarding the City of Abbotsford’s application. I also support facts and information.

It’s simply not true that the recent Abbotsford decision removed prime, operating farmland (“178.5 hectares currently under production for cattle, raspberries, poultry, greenhouses, and nursery stock”). In fact, only a very small portion of the land is under production, as is clearly evident by the aerial photos.

Nor is it the largest exclusion in ALR history. Commission exclusion records show that there have been instances over the past three decades where large blocks of land (equal to or larger than Abbotsford) have been excluded.

Some of these were decided by the Commission, but many were Cabinet decisions made in the 1970s, 1980s and up until 1992. In 1992, political decision-making was removed from the process.

As the new minister responsible for our agriculture sector, I am proud that B.C.'s fertile lands yield some of the world's highest quality agricultural and food products. We produce a

greater variety of agricultural products over a wider range of geographical and climatic conditions than any other area in Canada.

There are more than 20,000 farms, 900 food processors, 8,100 food service establishments and 2,700 retail stores in B.C. Almost half of the farms are in the flat, fertile Fraser River Valley.

And I am also proud that B.C. has preserved five per cent of its total land base, or more than 4.7 million hectares (11.6 million acres) within the ALR, so our best agricultural lands will remain stable and secure for future food production.

The Agricultural Land Commission administers the ALR as an independent, arms'-length agency. Our government has worked hard to make it work better and more independently. We enhanced the regional panel structure of the ALC in 2002 to better balance provincial interest with community needs so communities have greater input into what happens locally.

There is no reason why someone from my constituency in Prince George, for example, should make land use decisions affecting the Fraser Valley – or for a Cabinet to override decisions of the ALC, as the previous government did with the Six Mile Ranch in Kamloops.

The Abbotsford decision was made by the South Coast panel. Appointments were coordinated through the BC Resourcing and Development Office, following established guidelines. It would be inappropriate for me to become involved in their decisions.

Since 2001, in the South Coast region, the ALC has excluded 519.7 hectares from the ALR, rejected applications for another 416.8 ha and has added 35.9 ha.

British Columbia's Agricultural Land Reserve is the envy of governments and farmers around the world – the ALC frequently provides information to international delegations.

Clearly, the ALC is successfully working with local governments, communities and farmers to preserve our farmland and encourage farming while considering community interests. That's a win for all British Columbians, as far as I'm concerned.